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Black Men: Are They Imperiled?

By Felicia R. Lee

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One by one they took the microphone yesterday. Men and women, academicians and politicians, entrepreneurs and former convicts, they told the Harlem audience the same thing: black men are an endangered species.

The occasion was the first of several planned statewide public hearings about black men sponsored by the New York State Black and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus.

The caucus formed a task force focusing on black men after a study released in February showed that almost one of every four young black males is behind bars or on probation or parole. The study, based on Justice Department data, was done by a group called the Sentencing Project.

The hearing attracted more than 700 people to the Apollo Theater and explored a laundry list of problems including high rates of homicide, incarceration and joblessness. The hearing, which was broadcast live on WLIB-AM, also looked at solutions like alternative schools and job training.

''We're being broadcast all over the metropolitan area today and I think it will generate in the minds of black men that they have to be more involved in saving themselves and the black family,'' said Assemblyman Albert Vann, Democrat of Brooklyn, chairman of the 25-member legislative caucus.

'Devastating Our Men'

Vivian Gordon, a professor of African-American studies at the State University of New York in Albany and a specialist on the black family, said: ''I believe black men are a hunted and endangered species. You kill off the male and leave the woman vulnerable and without a partner. They have done everything to devastate us by devastating our men.''

In New York State, the number of black men in prison grew by 80 percent between 1970 and 1986, nine points higher than the national average. In New York City, black men have an unemployment rate 2.5 times higher than white men.

Other studies show that homicide is the leading cause of death among black men under 25 - 10 times higher than for white men - and that the suicide rate among young black men has increased yearly. Black men under 45 years old are 10 times more likely than whites to die of hypertension and have a 45 percent higher rate of lung cancer.

Walter W. Stafford, a professor of urban planning and public administration at New York University, said he found it ''astounding'' that in the last decade six black men in New York City have died from race-related violence.

''Today's meeting was a beginning,'' Dr. Stafford said. ''Blacks have been in New York since 1626 and these problems are not new but no one has been addressing them.''

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